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STATE FOR NEA FRONT OFFICE AND NEA/IPA; NSC FOR
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TAGS: PREL KPAL KWBG
SUBJECT: OCTOBER 2 PALESTINIAN CLASHES WITH HAMAS

REF: TEL AVIV 5956

Classified By: Consul General Jake Walles. Reasons: 1.4. (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Clashes took place in Gaza on October 2 between Palestinian Authority (PA) policemen and Hamas gunmen. Three Palestinians were killed -- a senior police officer and two civilians -- while at least 51 were wounded, many of whom were bystanders. Two police stations in the vicinity of Gaza City were badly damaged, while others were set ablaze. PLO Chief Negotiator Sa'eb Erekat and PLC Member Hanan Ashrawi, in separate conversations with Consul General, provided their views on the events, while the PA and Hamas have offered differing public explanations. These clashes represent the first efforts by the PA Security Forces to enforce the display of weapons in public. End Summary.

¶2. (C) PLO Chief Negotiator Sa'eb Erekat, speaking to the Consul General during the evening of October 2, said the clashes began as a result of PA efforts to crack down on public displays of weapons. Erekat said that Hamas retaliated against PA police stations using weapons - including rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs). Erekat emphasized that PA forces consider themselves outgunned and appealed again for additional weapons and ammunition for the security forces. The PA Ministry of Interior issued a public statement that said the clashes started when a PA police patrol attempted to break up a fight between individuals near Bank of Palestine in al Nasser Street in Gaza city. One of those involved in the fight was a Hamas member who called other gunmen as reinforcements. There are also press reports that a PA police patrol in Gaza City stopped a car containing four armed Hamas members and tried to confiscate their weapons; one person was Mohammed Rantisi, a son of Abdel Aziz Rantisi, the former Hamas leader killed by Israel two years ago. The encounter reportedly escalated into gunfire between the Hamas members and the PA police, with armed Fatah gunmen joining in on the side of the police. PA sources said that Hamas gunmen fired RPGs at PA police stations in Gaza City neighborhoods. The clashes moved on to the Shati Refugee camp west of Gaza, which is where the Palestinian police officer was killed. Other details are in reftel.

¶3. (C) PLC Member Hanan Ashrawi told Consul General on October 3 that she expected increased criticism against Hamas, who she thought was losing support because of incidents such as those which occurred in the Jabalya Refugee camp on September 23. She said she was urging others to speak up, and clarify that clashes such as those which had occurred on October 2 were not simply Fatah vs. Hamas, but rather Hamas vs. the Palestinian Authority. Ashrawi also remarked that recent Hamas statements were the first time she had seen them "so meek;" in reaction to Israeli threats of further retaliation against more Qassam rocket launches, Hamas spokesmen specifically articulated that they would return to the "calm," rather than their usual more vitriolic response. Ashrawi also thought that Hamas was taken aback by the recent voting results in the West Bank, which have been widely seen as a Fatah victory. In all, Ashrawi stressed the need for the PA to "come out on top" in any actions against Hamas, and to be seen as being on the right side of the issue.

¶4. (C) The Follow-Up Committee of the National and Islamic Factions -- which includes PA representatives as well as Fatah, Hamas and other militias -- met late on October 2 in Gaza to contain the crisis, according to press reports. Ibrahim Abu al-Naja, coordinator of the committee, told the press that the meeting contained the crisis and all gunmen were pulled from the streets as of midnight. Abu al-Naja also said that further meetings will take place to ensure that such incidents will not reoccur.

¶5. (C) The PA and Hamas exchanged accusations about the clashes. In a public statement, the Palestinian Interior Ministry blamed Hamas for the escalation in Gaza: "Hamas has breached the Palestinian factions' agreements and the Palestinian Authority's orders to lay down its arms ... The clashes erupted after PA police offices attempted to confiscate weapons of gunmen who were in a car. The gunmen proceeded to fire at the officers; this caused the outbreak of the recent events." Hamas refuted the PA's version, insisting that PA police opened fire at Mohammed Rantisi's car and attempted to arrest him. Hamas official Mushir al-Masri accused elements within the PA of creating friction in an attempt to crack down on Hamas, according to press reports. Other Hamas officials, including Mohammed Nazal from Lebanon, said Hamas is being targeted by "a few within the PA who seek to start a Palestinian civil war."

¶6. (C) Comment: These clashes represent the first efforts by PA security forces to enforce the ban on the display of weapons in public. We will monitor the situation closely to determine if these first steps are part of a sustained effort.

WALLES